

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: December 10, 2012

Agenda Item: Seven Sisters Wildlife Management Area – Land Acquisition (WMA Addition)

Division: Fish and Wildlife

Action Needed: Final Approval

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks proposes to purchase approximately 981 acres of riparian wildlife habitat along the lower Yellowstone River as a fee-title addition to the existing 560-acre Seven Sisters Wildlife Management Area. The property consists of an undeveloped 710-acre island parcel dominated by cottonwood and ash forest, along with a 271-acre mainland parcel comprised of riparian habitat and managed farm land. The property is located near the town of Crane in Richland County, 10 miles south of Sidney. The Yellowstone Valley Railroad borders the west side of the mainland parcel. FWP will manage the property for dispersed public recreation (including high-quality hunting for pheasant, deer and waterfowl, as well as wildlife viewing) and managed crop lands to provide food and cover resources for game birds. FWP will purchase the land from its long-time owner for the appraised value of approximately \$1,285,000 (approx. \$1,310/acre). Funding will come from the Habitat Montana account or a mix of Habitat Montana and federal sources (either Pittman-Robertson or State Wildlife Grants), pending U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service approval.

Public Involvement Process & Results

The Environmental Assessment for the project was released on Oct. 17, with comments accepted through Nov. 8. A public hearing was held in Sidney on Oct. 30. The project received overall support, with sixteen (16) comments in favor and one (1) person opposed. There were many comments on management issues (need for safety zones near residences; concerns about motorized use; questions on property boundaries; and the need for strong enforcement presence on the WMA due to the influx of non-traditional users associated with the oil boom and related housing shortage). FWP issued its decision notice supporting the land acquisition on Nov. 13, 2012.

Alternatives and Analysis

As one of the few large deeded islands in the lower Yellowstone River, the proposed Seven Sisters WMA addition represents a highly desirable recreational tract, together with productive irrigated crop land. If FWP does not purchase the property and it is sold privately, the public would not have access to this property and its substantial recreational opportunities. In addition, FWP would not be able to conserve the riparian forest habitat or manage the crop land for wildlife benefit. Alternatively, FWP acquisition of the property would complement management of the existing WMA.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends that the commission approve the purchase of this land as an addition to the Seven Sisters WMA, conserving important habitat, providing quality hunting and other recreational opportunities, and expanding FWP's management to benefit wildlife populations. FWP further recommends that the Commission authorize the Department to adjust the boundary through the out-sale of up to 5 acres in the vicinity of a neighboring residence, as may be appropriate to address management or safety concerns.

Proposed Motion

I move the FWP Commission approve the purchase of this addition to the Seven Sisters WMA, along with the subsequent out-sale of up to 5 acres of this property if necessary for management or safety reasons.